

The Powell Memo

by Bill Herbst

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America has always struggled with the conflict between lofty ideals and abject corruption. There is no clear “beginning” to that struggle, but there is a significant tipping point. It came in 1971, in a “Memo” (really, an urgent warning), written by then-lawyer Lewis Powell, who later became a Justice on the U.S. Supreme Court, which Powell sent out to many high-level officials in the U.S. Chamber of Commerce all across the country. Ironically, during Powell’s tenure on the Supreme Court, he was considered a moderate jurist, often providing a swing vote in conservative or liberal decisions. There was, however, no moderation at all in his 1971 Memo. It was reactionary in the extreme.

Among regular Americans, this event isn’t well-known, but it should be. Basically, Powell’s Memo kick-started the development and adoption of extreme right-wing neoliberalism, which holds that capitalism (i.e., “free” economic markets, private ownership of everything, and concentration of wealth in few hands) is sacred. For neoliberals, every other consideration pales as a value compared to the primacy of commerce and money. That’s what matters. That’s all that matters.

In the 34-page Memo, Powell warned his fellow wealthy capitalists that the existing systems of life, society, and business in America — and, by implication, his cronies’ positions of privilege and power — were seriously threatened by the “radical-left” movements of the 1960s. These included both the centrist liberalism of Lyndon Johnson’s “Great Society” initiatives and the deeper, more sweeping visions of a different America that had emerged from racial civil rights activism and economic justice advocacy. To combat and defeat this threat, Powell urged the immediate creation in the corporate world of a full-tilt campaign that would amount to a “counter-revolution.”

The bulk of the Memo is a detailed and comprehensive blueprint for waging a war against socialism and more equitable distribution of wealth through a massively-funded strategy of carefully crafted narratives, essentially propaganda designed to change social policy by winning the hearts and minds of gullible Americans at every level of society.

The impact of the Powell Memo has been debated to this day. I don’t have an opinion about how important its effects were, but I think the timing of the memo’s circulation was profoundly meaningful. It marked the beginning of

organized backlash to the turbulence and upheavals of the 1960s. A sizable number of Americans had gradually realized how empty, cruel, and violent our culture was, and how cynically hollow our ideals of equality, justice, and democracy were. Grassroots movements had arisen to change America.

Powell and people like him — who represented the social and political elites, as well as the financial winners of the existing system — regarded these movements as poisonous weeds in the garden. Powell's Memo was a call to arms to pluck the weeds and kill the revolts. It also drew a "line in the sand" by advocating a shift among the wealthy (perhaps inadvertently, but maybe intentionally) away from their former "noblesse oblige" stance. That orientation, while hardly noble, at least acknowledged that privilege and power required a certain paternal responsibility toward others less endowed. Instead, corporate America was urged to adopt a "take-no-prisoners" approach to defending their domination. The Memo presumed and affirmed the modern capitalist version of the ancient Divine Right of Kings: *"We are God's Chosen People, and we need not be concerned at all about those who are not chosen. All of them are effectively our servants (or slaves)."*

In the years following the distribution of the Memo, Corporate America and the wealthy business sector responded aggressively and with a vengeance. The 1970s became the decade where actual class warfare was declared by the rich against everyone else (although that is routinely denied). From that point on, the agenda of many of those at the top in terms of the accumulation of wealth and power became *"everything for us and nothing for them."* They told us that this was for the greater good (i.e., "trickle down"), but they lied. Ever since the Disco Decade, the political, economic, and cultural right wings in America have been intent on destroying every social safety net, from welfare to health care to Social Security.

Such intentions, underpinned by belief in the innate superiority of the winners (i.e., rich and/or white), along with large doses of raw, unapologetic greed and insensitivity to the suffering of others, could not be promoted honestly. Americans would reject it. This was not a problem, though, for the leaders of the counter-revolution. However cynical it may sound, they knew full well that lying was the only way they could succeed. So they began to construct dubious but compelling narratives designed to hoodwink a gullible public. They had the money and the gumption to do this by funding think tanks (like the American Enterprise Institute and hundreds of others), Talk Radio shows (such as Rush Limbaugh), and Fox News — all of which functioned as laboratories for throwing spaghetti against the wall to learn what stuck and what didn't.

We can trace the progression over the past 50 years of this incredibly successful counter-revolution in as detailed a fashion as we like. I'll shorthand it — what started as "Ditto-heads" morphed into the Tea Party, which set up the election of Donald Trump, which led to the mainstreaming of QAnon. In other words,

neoliberalism spawned a virulent strain of insanity that took root in America and ended up infecting a significant percentage of the population. Tens of millions of Americans ended up as the Walking Dead. Zombies. Many of them were rich Zombies. Many others were not rich, but aspired to become so.

This was not just an extension of the longstanding, historical dark underbelly of American insanity, which has been with us since the colonization of the New World, but an even more extreme and raging form of overt and aggressive madness. It's a disease of the mind, heart, body, and soul that is effectively fatal. No cure has been discovered. Those who succumb to it rarely recover. Once this madness is contracted, the victims are crazy for the rest of their woe begotten lives. The vast majority go to their eventual graves still Mad as Hatters. And the Powell Memo marked the beginning of the pandemic. (Sorry. Disease metaphors are part of the zeitgeist of 2020. It's unavoidable...)

Is there a silver lining to this terrible storm? I'm not sure there is really, but I'll offer one possibility that seems to be taking shape. It'll take me the rest of the commentary to get to it, though, so bear with me.

Throughout the quarter-millennium of America's existence as a nation, the madness had been at least partially veiled. Not that it's ever been truly hidden from view. No, it's always been obvious to anyone who cares to look. By mixing a lot of madness with a little bit of sanity, however, it becomes difficult for many people to see the madness for what it is. It appears to a significant percentage of Americans to be reasonable and sane. In other words, we mistake what is actually horrific for something that appears to be good.

As an example, consider the ideal of "freedom." For many Americans, the idea of freedom has been perverted by neoliberal propaganda into its most infantile form (basically, the promotion of individual liberty as total license to do any goddamned thing one wants in pursuit of personal gain, and screw the consequences to others and society). We get a little lip service about social responsibility, but that's overwhelmed by a constant barrage of permission and encouragement for the crudest self interest. By appealing to our basest instincts while throwing a bone to our nobler aspirations, the propaganda works to keep us stupid.

I apologize. "Stupid" is probably not the right word to use in describing Americans. "Deluded" is almost certainly a more accurate term.

This propaganda didn't begin with the Powell Memo. No, it goes way, way back — to the very beginnings of civilization. What the Powell Memo did was to encourage the use of very sophisticated and particularly American techniques of mass marketing perfected in the 20th century to achieve what Noam Chomsky called "manufacturing consent." And boy, did it work!

What's happening now in 2020 is that the madness has reached such astonishing proportions in America that the entire culture is collapsing. Whatever ability we once enjoyed as a people to respond to reality's challenges have been lost through corruption and delusion. Curiously enough, though, that welling up of insanity might be a good thing. What seems to be happening is that those not too seriously infected by the madness are now seeing its disastrous collective effects more plainly than ever before. For many Americans, this new vision of how insane our country is represents something of a revelation. *Really? We're this crazy? Wow.*

It's far from certain that America can be saved, but we have to try. Sadly, the medical concept of "triage" applies here. Not everyone can be healed. Some people are simply too far gone into the madness. All we can hope to do is take away their power to harm everyone else.

But that's a start.